
INTRODUCTION

THE DAY IS BITTERLY COLD. I SEE STEAM BLOOMING FROM A man's lips as he jumps down from the trolley car on the Upper West Side at Broadway and Seventy-third Street. His feet hit the icy sidewalk and the streetcar clangs away with all the acoustic precision that sound has on very cold days. He tugs the brim of his hat low over his eyes. The other passengers from downtown have been discussing the war, but he has not been thinking about the Japanese, or Hitler, or bombs. He has instead been thinking of his hands on the piano keyboard. The thought makes his mouth dry. Gripping the leather handle of his music satchel, he hesitates on the street corner for a moment. Then he sets off, crossing Broadway with a gray crowd of Sunday strollers. He skirts the upper edge of Verdi Square. Through the trees, the statue of the composer stands, his back turned, as if to eschew the sorry kind of musician the man has become. He walks on past the Central Savings Bank, glancing up at the clock above the door that says it is a minute or two before four o'clock. Crossing Amsterdam Avenue onto West Seventy-third Street, he stops for a moment to check the advertisement torn from the newspaper and now folded—a little furtively—in his coat pocket: NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY. There it is—on the right. He passes beneath the portico and steps across the polished hallway into a wood-paneled elevator. With a clunk, he is lifted skyward, and when the elevator boy yanks open the metal grille again, the man

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finds himself at the inaugural meeting of the Society of Timid Souls.



Only fragments remain about what really happened that January day. We know that the year was 1942. We also know that just four unsteady piano players responded to the first advertisement placed by Bernard Gabriel, a professional concert pianist, publicizing a series of meetings to be held at his Manhattan apartment on the first and third Sunday afternoon of every month. In exchange for seventy-five cents apiece—to cover, so the notice in *The New York Times* read, “refreshments”—fear-racked musicians were invited to step in out of the cold and “to play, to criticize and be criticized, in order to conquer the old bogey of stage fright.” They were to assemble at Sherman Square Studios, high above West Seventy-third Street, in a room bare but for two Steinway grand pianos and so extensively soundproofed that no one would hear what went on behind the closed door. Inside was Maestro Gabriel, with no formal qualification for this work other than a confidence beyond his thirty years. Gabriel was, it was said, “non-timid” and duly he proceeded to deploy what he called “strange and devious methods” to inoculate those in attendance against their fears.

By the early summer, the Society of Timid Souls numbered more than twenty, and on May 17, *The New Yorker* sent along a reporter, Charles Cooke, who happened to be a pianist himself. First Cooke encountered the silver-haired Mr. William Hopkins, who told him, “I’m old enough to know better and I’m scared to death,” before plunging into a Respighi nocturne. Next came Mrs. Moeller, who grew flustered if the audience was silent. Then Miss Simson, who panicked even when others played. Finally, the mysterious inoculation process was revealed, with the revival of a Timid Soul belonging to a Miss Flora Cantwell.

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"This afternoon," said Bernard Gabriel, "I'm going to kill or cure her."

Flora Cantwell sat down at one of the two pianos and began to play an *étude*. As she stumbled through—so Charles Cooke told his readers—Mr. Gabriel moved among the Society members handing out props, a whistle here, a rattle there, occasionally pausing to whisper something into another Timid Soul's ear.

Miss Cantwell finished playing.

"Again," said Gabriel, and the moment the *étude* resumed—pandemonium.

Miss Simson blew Bronx cheers on a Bronx-cheer blower. Mr. Carr spun a watchman's rattle. Mr. Hopkins repeatedly slammed the door. Miss Cohen warbled "Daydreams Come True at Night" and Mrs. Moeller flung the Manhattan Telephone Directory at the floor.

Flora Cantwell tucked her head down and kept playing.

Bernard Gabriel now crashed his hands upon the keyboard of the other Steinway, shouting, "You're playing abominably, but don't stop!"

She did as he said and rising from the piano at the end, Miss Cantwell reported, "I could play it in a boiler factory now."

Bernard Gabriel's apparently comical methods proved to be remarkably effective. Many Timid Souls claimed to have been "cured" by a dose of his "antitoxin," and a year later, Society membership had doubled to include timid actors, timid singers, timid public speakers, and timid parlor entertainers, each of them desperate to learn—or to remember—how to be brave.

The rudimentary exposure therapy techniques improvised those Sunday afternoons on West Seventy-third Street, while not unheard of, were certainly ahead of their time. In 1940s Manhattan, qualms like those of the Timid Souls would typically have been treated with rest and barbiturates; or if you were very mod-

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ern, perhaps an evening of dream analysis at a “Freuding” party. “*In vivo* flooding,” as methods like Gabriel’s later became known, would have to wait a further thirty years to gain much in the way of clinical credence. And yet this was how the Society of Timid Souls were healing themselves—and each other—every other weekend.

Copycat societies soon followed for nervous fashion models and others. Even Charles Cooke, the piano-playing reporter from *The New Yorker*, was whispered to have gone native and signed up as a Timid Soul himself. Said Bernard Gabriel triumphantly to the correspondent from *Reader’s Digest* who visited in April 1943, “I can see no reason why the shy and timid in any community couldn’t get together and help each other.”



It would be easy to dismiss the Society of Timid Souls as a period piece, quaint but scarcely important. I did at first, but then the timing of Bernard Gabriel’s experiment in stress inoculation caught my eye.

For the first meeting of Timid Souls was called just four weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States joined World War II. While Jewish refugees had been flooding into Gabriel’s Upper West Side neighborhood for many months, now America itself entered the fray. That very evening, December 7, 1941, a teacher at the Modern Piano School in New York City noted in her diary how Bernard Gabriel had been warming up to play a concert as news of the Japanese attack came over the wireless. And I imagined how preperformance nerves must now have mingled with a deeper fear that ran through everyone gathered there that night and in the streets beyond.

My curiosity was piqued. Further scrutiny of what I still assumed to be little more than a historical coincidence revealed that

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this Society of Timid Souls had offered its whimsical response to big ideas and world events in other ways too. For the phrase “timid souls” was not Mr. Gabriel’s own, nor did its origins share his affection, or at least his sympathy, for those cowed by life’s little anxieties. “Timid souls” comes instead from a famous speech given in 1910 by Theodore Roosevelt, in which the president invoked a muscular apparition of courage: “the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; . . . who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Roosevelt’s rhetoric is thrilling, of course, but it was Bernard Gabriel’s enterprise that I found myself admiring. I felt uplifted by how quietly radical its rehabilitation of the very idea of timidity was. For however stirring the ideal of “the man in the arena,” the substance of Roosevelt’s argument seemed to have missed the point about timidity, a point that the Society of Timid Souls intuitively understood: that the world is not populated only by square-jawed heroes and sniveling cowards. Instead, whenever the times are troubled and fearful, then or now, the vast majority of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle, wishing to be brave and yet easily frightened by what is frightening. Either that, or we are capable of facing real danger one day, the next scared out of our wits by something comparatively trivial.

Consider, for example, this striking account of a Timid Soul redeemed on West Seventy-third Street, one of the last to have been printed about the Society. It concerns a young man, Sidney Lawson, who had grown up with a fine tenor voice and in 1941 had sung in Robert Shaw’s Collegiate Chorale. Then came the war. Young Sidney joined the infantry and left New York before his twentieth birthday to fight overseas. A year later, he was

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shot and paralyzed for six months. Along with his innocence, it seemed, gone too was Lawson's love of the stage. Technically he could sing as well as ever, but performing now terrified him. Finally in the late spring of 1945, Sidney Lawson joined the Society of Timid Souls. There, week after week, he forced himself to sing in a room full of people who "stared glassily, milled about, rang bells, booed. When he bowed for applause, they shouted that he was a ham"—so reported *Time* magazine in August 1945. Eventually, however, Lawson summoned the courage to take a party booking at the Hotel Pierre, one of New York's glossiest hot spots. With a gold army discharge stud pinned to his dinner jacket, Sidney Lawson took the stage once more, and singing showbusiness songs, the young war veteran was reborn. He was signed the next day by a big Broadway agent.

As if to confirm what I now saw woven into the story of the Society of Timid Souls, the largest meetings at Sherman Square Studios—those with forty or more in attendance—and the swell of press coverage that accompanied them turned out to coincide with the paroxysms of 1944 and 1945. Most telling of all is that by the end of 1946—for no apparent reason other than that the war was over and things were looking up—the Society of Timid Souls seems to have sunk without a trace, its season passed. Bernard Gabriel moved on to other musical enterprises, and the Timid Souls dispersed forever into the Manhattan crowds.



I began to wonder whether there was more to this Society of Timid Souls than met the eye. Gossamer threads of connection seemed to lead out from its trifling eccentricities across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, suspended gauzily between war and politics, psychology and identity, courage and fear.

Certainly, in the years since 9/11, our understanding of these